

Politics by Punchline

Political Humor on Late Night TV 1989-2002

Major findings:

- **Funny Business** Latenight comics have told 50,000 political jokes since 1989. *Page 1*
- **Clinton Rules** Leno and Letterman have told 6,380 jokes about Bill Clinton. *Page 3*
- **Lapping the Field** Bill's total tops those of Bush Sr. and Jr., Monica, Hillary, O.J., Al Gore, and Dan Quayle combined. *Page 3*
- **Leno Leads Letterman** Jay has told over 30% more jokes than Dave. *Page 2*
- **Equal Opportunity Zingers** GOP candidates were joked about more often than Democrats in presidential elections. *Page 4*
- **Gone But Not Forgotten** Osama bin Laden is the top target since 9/11, but Clinton tops the list so far in 2002. *Page 6*

Since 1989, the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) has monitored the politically-oriented content of monologues on late night talk shows. In the past 13 years we have tallied 49,683 jokes. While there have been many late night contenders, only a few have stood the test of time. In this issue we examine the favorite targets and major trends of the monologues, focusing on Jay Leno and David Letterman.

In February, Vice President Dick Cheney served as an opening act for the *Tonight Show*. In April, Attorney General John Ashcroft was a good sport when he took his turn as the target of one of David Letterman's notorious Top Ten Lists. They are just the most recent participants in a parade of high ranking officials and politicians to appear on late night talk shows. While their motivations may vary, they all can be assured the audience is tuning in. On average, some seven million Americans go to sleep with the *Tonight Show*, while another five million choose the *Late Show*. And viewers are getting more than just laughs. According to recent surveys, 30 percent of all Americans and half of those under 30, use the late night shows as a source of news about politics.

Since January 1989, CMPA has been monitoring the political and public affairs content of the late night monologues. This issue of *Media Monitor* explores the major trends and changes in the genre over the past 13 years. During that time, many late night series have come and gone. The *Pat Sajak Show*, *Vibe*, *Keenan Ivory Wayans*, the *Chevy Chase Show* and the *Magic Hour* all quickly faded from the tube, and from public memory. *The Arsenio Hall Show* had a longer run than most, but was cancelled by the mid-nineties, leaving the venerable

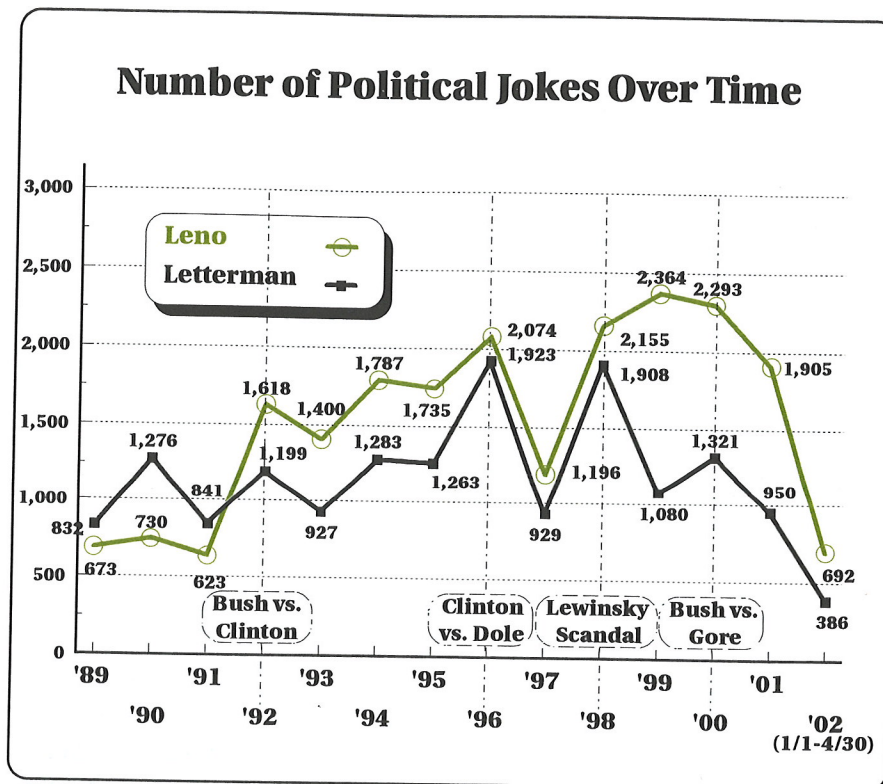
(continued on page 2)

Tonight Show, the *Late Show with David Letterman*, *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* and *Politically Incorrect* to entertain us. Since only Jay Leno and David Letterman have provided a consistent presence, we will focus on these two shows.

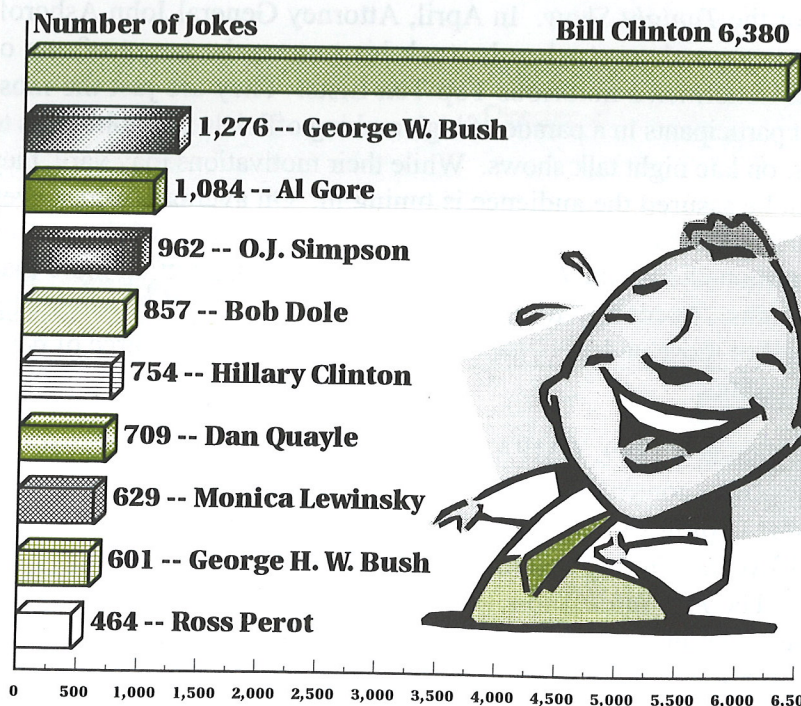
A Rising Tide

From January 1, 1989 through April 30, 2002 Jay Leno told 21,245 politically oriented jokes, while David Letterman tossed out 16,118 political punchlines. All other hosts combined told 12,320. That doesn't include jokes about sports teams, movies, celebrities and other pop culture tidbits that fill out the monologues.

There has been a gradual rise in the number of political jokes over the years, peaking in 1998 with the



Top 10 Joke Targets* 1989-April 30, 2002



* Jay Leno and David Letterman only

revelation of President Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky. In the eight days following that disclosure Leno told a record setting average of 23 political jokes per night, more than doubling his 1997 average of nine jokes per night. Letterman's average jumped to 26 political jokes per night, nearly quadrupling his 1997 average of seven jokes per night. Leno and Letterman combined for 4,063 political jokes in 1998, more than any year before or since.

Top Joke Targets

In the past 13 years no one has come close to supplying as much material for the late night joke mill as Bill Clinton. Jay Leno joked during his tenth anniversary show, "In any successful enterprise there is always that one special person who helps you get through it. That one person who becomes the focus of what you do. Of course for me that person is Bill Clinton. God Bless Him! Where

would I be without him?" Together Leno and Letterman have told 6,380 jokes about Bill Clinton, five times more than his closest rival George W. Bush (1,276 punchlines). Since taking office in 1993, Bill Clinton has been the number one joke target every year but two. Bob Dole edged him out during the 1996 Presidential campaign and George W. Bush took center stage during campaign 2000.

In 1989 and 1990 Dan Quayle was the most frequent joke target with 76 and 111 jokes respectively. Saddam Hussein (75 jokes) took over the top spot in 1991, followed closely by Quayle (67). Saddam Hussein jokes were unusual at the time for their acrimony and patriotic fervor. It was not until the aftermath of 9/11 that patriotism and anger at America's enemies resurfaced in the late night talk shows. During the 1992 campaign George Bush took the lead with 364 jokes, followed by his rival

Bill Clinton with 271. The rise in the number of jokes reflects Leno taking the helm of the *Tonight Show* in May. Now onstage five nights a week, Leno's topical focus put politics front and center.

Despite his seemingly high comic profile at the time, Mr. Quayle was the target of 447 jokes during his four years as vice president. Mr. Clinton nearly matched that level in his first year in office with 380 jokes in 1993. By 1994, Clinton's annual total (470) had surpassed Quayle's four year total.

Bill Clinton ruled late night TV by large margins in 1993, 1994 and 1995. Only O.J. Simpson would come close to rivaling Bill Clinton in 1995, but the President still surpassed the star of the celebrity murder trial by a wide margin (335 vs 225). Through 1995, '96 and '97, O.J. Simpson ran second or third as his acquittal in the criminal trial and subsequent loss in

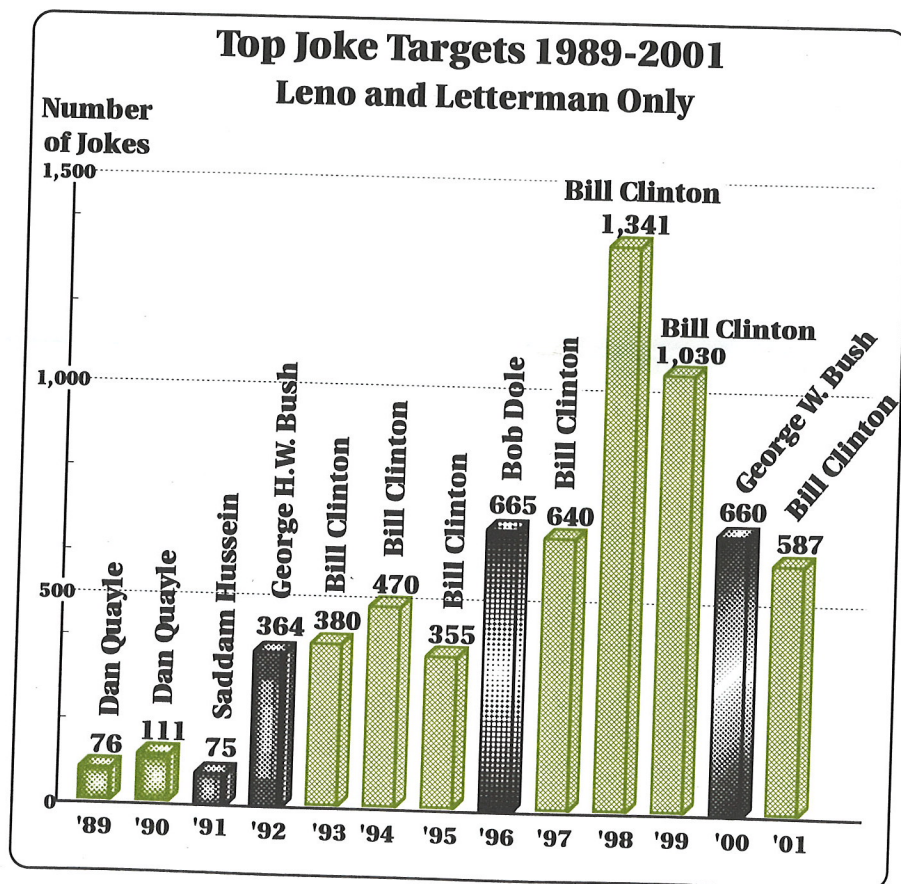
the wrongful death civil suit drew attention and kept the comedy alive.

Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole finished second at the polls but first in the monologues in 1996, with 665 jokes vs. 570 for Clinton, as his age and dour demeanor became grist for the comedians' mill. Once ensconced for a second term, however, President Clinton rode a rising tide of scandal-driven jokes over the next three years. Only campaign 2000 knocked Bill Clinton out of the top spot, which went to George W. Bush (660 jokes to 623 for Gore). The former president climbed back on top in 2001 with 587 jokes. It is remarkable that an outgoing president could attract more barbs than an incoming one. The top 10 joke targets from previous years can be found on our website. (www.cmpa.com/comedy/prevyrs.htm)

The Leno Decade

On May 22, 1992 Johnny Carson retired as host of the *Tonight Show*, an event that marked a clear shift in the direction of late night talk shows. The *Tonight Show* had always been more political than its competitors, but with Jay Leno as host the timely political content would jump dramatically.

During his decade at the helm Jay has told a remarkable 18,922 political jokes. The leading target, not surprisingly, has been Bill Clinton (3,758 jokes). His total surpassed the next seven targets combined. Perhaps the most unique period for the *Tonight Show* was the OJ Simpson trial in 1994 - 95. Over the past decade Leno has told nearly twice as many jokes about O.J. as Letterman, but that is only part of the story. Who could forget the "Dancing Itos" dance troop and the Marcia Clark, Chris Darden and Johnnie Cochran impersonators who showed up in many sketches?



While Leno and Letterman tend to target the same figures, they have different emphases. Bob Dole placed second on Letterman's list versus fifth for Leno. Hillary Clinton had a higher profile on Letterman (fourth vs seventh for Leno), largely due to her successful run for a Senate seat from New York. Dan Quayle was more prominent on the *Late Show*, finishing in seventh place versus tenth place on the *Tonight Show*.

"The Road to the White House Runs Through Me"

While Letterman was joking when he made this claim, it appears to be coming true. Back in 1992, Arsenio Hall broke new ground when Bill Clinton sat in with the band and played his sax on Hall's show. At the time it was a maverick move (on both their parts), but it would serve to rewrite the rules of campaigning.

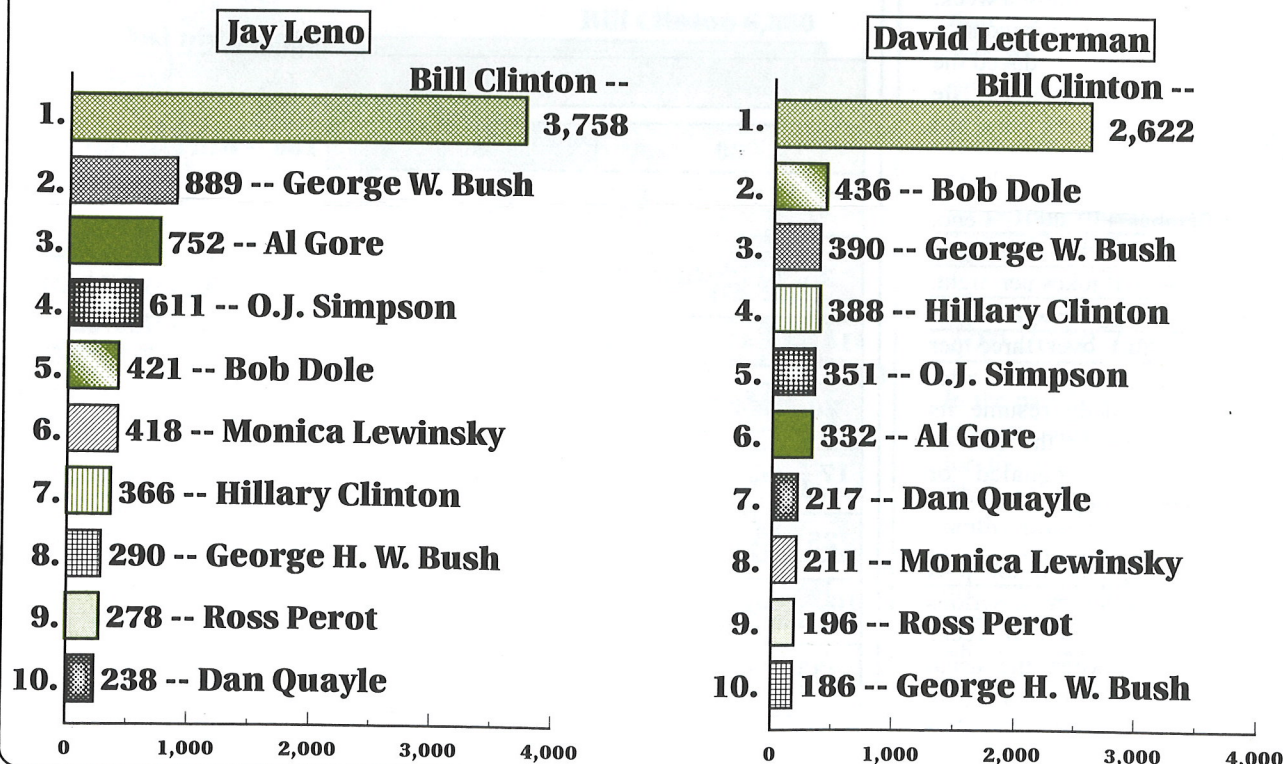
By the 2000 race, late night talk shows came to play an unprecedented role as a platform for the candidates. Al Gore, George Bush, Ralph Nader, Joseph Lieberman, John McCain and Hillary Clinton all stopped by to talk with Jay or Dave or Conan in their search for elected office. In the summer of 2000, it was David Letterman who stepped forward to offer his show as a venue for a debate between Al Gore and George Bush. Why do the candidates do it? One answer might be a chance at unedited airtime. When George Bush appeared on the *Late Show* (10/19) he was on-screen for 13 minutes, which exceeded his entire speaking time on all three network news shows during the month of October. Similarly, Al Gore's appearance on Letterman (9/14) netted him more airtime than on all the network newscasts for the entire month of September. (*Media Monitor* Jan./Feb. 2001) A convergence of audience size, rising political content and new rules to campaigning have turned Letterman's flippant quip into a political truism.

To compare campaign punchlines we focused on the general election campaign season (defined as Labor Day through Election Day) when the race narrows to the final candidates. In each of the past four general election campaigns, Republican presidential candidates led the joke parade. Even in 1992, when the comedians had a field day with Clinton's personal life during the primaries, he was targeted less than half as many times as George H.W. Bush in the fall. Combining all jokes directed at the two major party tickets from 1988 through 2000, Republican tickets were the butt of 62 percent and Democrats 38 percent.

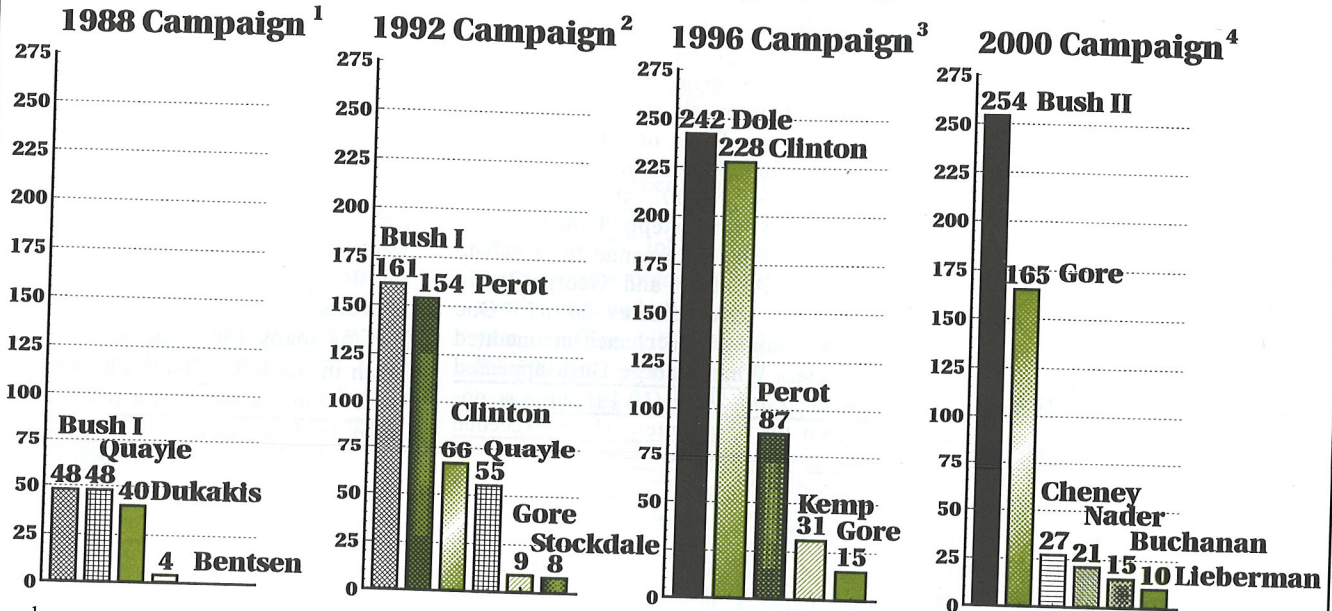
"Can We Go and Do Shows Now?"

That was Conan O'Brien's plaintive question on September 18th as he

Leno vs. Letterman Top 10 Joke Targets of the Decade
May 25, 1992 through April 30, 2002



General Election Joke Targets



¹Based on the Tonight Show and Latenight with David Letterman.

²Based on the Tonight Show, Latenight with David Letterman and the Arsenio Hall Show.

³Based on the Tonight Show, Latenight with David Letterman and LateNight with Conan O'Brien.

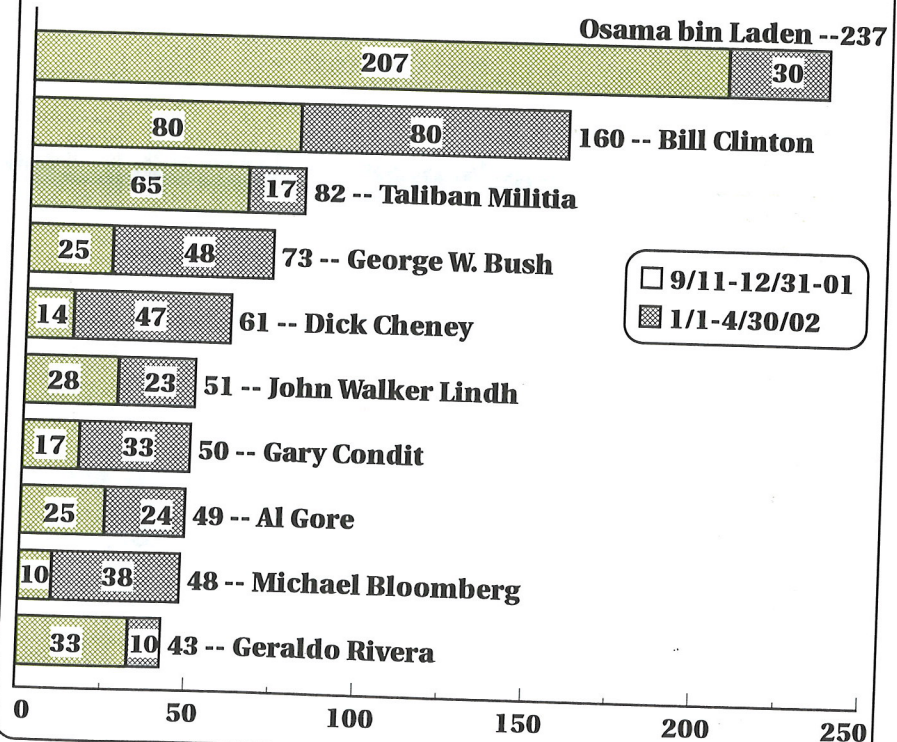
⁴Based on the Tonight Show, Latenight with David Letterman, LateNight with Conan O'Brien, and Politically Incorrect.

launched his first show following the September 11th attacks. The events of that historic day knocked regular programs off the air for almost a week, but their impact extended beyond a temporary absence. They reduced the amount of political material on late night shows and altered the guest list in subtle ways.

Prior to September 11th 2001, Leno, Letterman and O'Brien averaged almost seven political jokes per night. In the month following the attacks, the rate dropped to just over three per night. Not until three months after the attacks did comedy resume its normal pace. Recently the rate of political humor has equaled or exceeded pre-attack levels.

The selection of guests in the post 9/11 period also turned more serious – particularly in the first two weeks after the attacks – when the usual brand of humor seemed tasteless. Sen. John McCain, Dan Rather, Walter

Top 10 Joke Targets Since 9/11 Leno, Letterman and O'Brien Only



Cronkite and Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton were among the 30 percent of guests drawn from the news media, politics and academia during those first two weeks. For the entire 15 week period following the attacks we found that 10 percent of guests were now drawn from these serious fields compared to only five percent in the 15 weeks preceding the attacks.

In the wake of September 11th the targets of political humor shifted to reflect the use of comedy against

terrorism and the Taliban. The biggest beneficiaries of this shift were George W. Bush and Dick Cheney who virtually disappeared from late night monologues following 9/11. George Bush was the subject of only 25 jokes following 9/11 versus 521 prior to the attacks. Cheney was joked about 83 times before the attacks but only 14 times afterward. Replacing them at the top of the list were Osama bin Laden (207 jokes), Bill Clinton (80) and the Taliban militia (65).

But the shift was short lived as the new year brought a return to long established patterns. So far in 2002, Bill Clinton has regained his accustomed top spot (80 jokes) followed by President Bush (48), Dick Cheney (47), New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg (38) and Congressman Gary Condit (33). The addition of celebrity murder suspect Robert Blake to the 2002 Top 10 suggests that things are back to normal.

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